

19 May 2023

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Care and Education
Karna Country
GPO Box 11025
Adelaide
South Australia 5001

To the Proper Officer,

RE: UWU Submission to the Royal Commission into ECEC

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge and respect the continuing spirit, culture and contribution of Traditional Custodians on the lands where we work, and pay respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We extend our respects to Traditional Custodians of all the places that United Workers Union members live and work around the country.

About United Workers Union

United Workers Union (UWU) is a powerful new union with 150,000 workers across the country from more than 45 industries and all walks of life, standing together to make a difference. Our work reaches millions of people every single day of their lives. We feed you, educate you, provide care for you, keep your communities safe and get you the goods you need. Without us, everything stops. We are proud of the work we do—our paramedic members work around the clock to save lives; early childhood educators are shaping the future of the nation one child at a time; supermarket logistics members pack food for your local supermarket and farms workers put food on Australian dinner tables; hospitality members serve you a drink on your night off; aged care members provide quality care for our elderly and cleaning and security members ensure the spaces you work, travel and educate yourself in are safe and clean.

In our first submission, UWU members called on the Commission to consider a holistic vision for South Australian children in early childhood education and to recognise the central role educators play in high-quality early learning. We made the following four recommendations:

- 1.** The Royal Commission take a holistic approach to ECEC that delivers universal 3-year-old preschool across multiple settings, including not-for-profit LDC, to ensure not only the viability of the South Australian LDC sector, but the needs of South Australian families and the delivery of the highest quality ECEC.
- 2.** The Royal Commission retain a committed focus to workforce reform in line with the crucial role that early childhood educators' pay, conditions and professional development play in ECEC quality.
- 3.** The Royal Commission investigate the introduction of publicly run, fit-for-purpose LDCs, that offer preschool programs, as a long term high-quality model that, at the very least, should be trialed in lower socio-economic areas where children stand to benefit the most from ECEC. We note that Victoria, a leader in ECEC reform, has taken this approach.

- 4. The Royal Commission demonstrate a commitment to ongoing excellence in ECEC and recommend a structured data collection and evaluation process in any proposed reforms to fill the gaps in both international and Australian research on ECEC quality, dose, participation, workforce and children's outcomes.**

We reiterate these recommendations with the following additional commentary on workforce and how the new supported bargaining laws offer a solution to the workforce crisis in ECEC.

The historical undervaluation of care work and the high fragmentation of the early learning sector nationally where there are over 17,000 services (1279 in SA) means that enterprise bargaining does not work in ECEC.¹ Both have led to low pay in the sector. As early as 1994, commentators were predicting that enterprise bargaining would not work in ECEC: "Women workers who are employed in the service industries, where 'output' cannot be measured and where there is little scope for technological and organisational change which may increase labour productivity in manufacturing, are unlikely to benefit from enterprise bargaining".²

In ECEC, low wages in the workforce are associated with significant levels of financial hardship, economic dependence on parents and partners, stress and mental health impacts, and housing insecurity. An immediate increase to the wages of educators was recommended by the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce ahead of the 2023 federal budget and early childhood educators implore the Commission to offer a similar recommendation in their final report.³ Universal access to ECEC for families through publicly-run LDC, coupled with collective bargaining for the (almost entirely) feminised workforce, is a multi-pronged approach to reducing the gender wage gap in Australia. It would value traditionally low-paid, feminised care and support jobs, increase workforce participation and even has the potential to add \$64 billion in GDP to the Australian economy.⁴ The Commission should support any policy levers that moves us forward to this vision.

Thus, in the absence of collective, industry-wide bargaining a multi-employer agreement (MEB) is the best solution to raise wages and improve working conditions in the sector and from 7 June, the new federal supported bargaining laws will allow this. Unions, employers and peaks have already been meeting to discuss a MEB as a solution to the workforce crisis and thus educators from all over Australia, not just South Australia, call on the Commission to also recommend that the Federal Government sit at the table as the key funder of the sector in any MEB.

Educators also remind the Commission that to attain a world class early learning sector as the South Australia government is keen to do, "policy makers need to engage with the early childhood education workforce to identify priorities for creating attractive working conditions."⁵ Moreover, a key theme of the evidence presented to the Commission thus far has been the importance of ECEC in addressing disadvantage. Everybody knows that children and families from low-socioeconomic areas derive the most benefit from access to high quality services. And for those children receiving care and education, the impact of staff turnover is keenly felt with the disruption of the child-educator relationship.⁶ Better pay would halt the high turnover in the sector. It is the number one reason why educators leave and increasing pay and conditions is widely accepted as a policy lever to increase retention of this important workforce.⁷

South Australia's workforce measures, as detailed in the Shaping our Future report,⁸ demonstrate a stark difference between teachers working in government preschools and educators in centre-based care. Preschool teachers have access to leadership programs, career and professional development training focused on the delivery of high-quality education. To be clear, this is a step in the right direction for increasing quality, building career pathways and supporting teachers in the sector, however, for ECEC educators, the focus is on subsidised training and micro-credentials that will not necessarily build a career pathway. Educators will not *remain* in the sector if they cannot access professional career pathways coupled with professional wages and conditions. The measures in place to increase retention and attract workers to ECEC in the current system are not enough.

South Australian families feel the impact of the ECEC market model two-fold: not only is their child's early education not adequately invested in by for-profit providers, but the wider community receives a poor return on investment for public spending in ECEC. UWU's first submission to the Royal Commission detailed how private-for-profit providers have poorer safety and compliance with National Quality Standards, reinvest less into the workforce comparable to other provider types, and that the current provider mix is incongruent with delivering high quality ECEC. Furthermore, much of South Australia does not have adequate access to ECEC; the electorate of Grey tops the list of electorates nationally for having the fewest places for ECEC services, whilst being in the top 10 electorates nationally of highest proportion of developmentally vulnerable children (28.9%).⁹ Grey covers 90% of the state.¹⁰ ECEC is increasingly recognised as essential by Australians, and a market-based approach to an essential government service such as education is not delivering the high quality, affordable ECEC or secure, professional jobs that the community deserves or expects.

Educators are looking to the Royal Commission's final report as a turning point for the sector, where evidence and the delivery of high quality ECEC is prioritised over market ideology and profit. The benefits of a universal system that fairly recognises educators and delivers accessible, high quality ECEC to South Australia's children are too great to ignore. UWU educator members thus recommend that:

- 5. The Commission call on the Federal Government to immediately fund a 25% pay increase for all early childhood educators and sit at the table of all multi-employer bargains as the key funder of the sector.**

Kind regards,

Helen Gibbons
Executive Director – Early Education
United Workers Union

¹ ACECQA NQF Snapshot, Q1, 2023.

² Kelly, R. (1994) 'Award restructuring and child care workers 1988-1992,' The University of Adelaide Centre for Labour Studies Research paper Series No. 2, June 1994, p. 18.

³ Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (2023). Letter to the Minister for Women re: Women's Economic Equality Taskforce advice for May 2023 budget.

⁴ Grudnoff, M. The Economic Benefits of High-Quality Universal Early Child Education. The Australia Institute. p. 36.

⁵ OECD (2020), Early Childhood Education: Equity, Quality and Transitions. Report for the G20 Education Working Group. p. 26.

⁶ Whitebook, M., D. Phillips and C. Howes (2014), Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study. Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley, p. 6.

⁷ European Commission (2022). Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care. P. 24 and Zaslow, M. (2022). *Early childhood education and care workforce*.

⁸ Shaping Our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022-2031 (2021), p. 37-8. Found at <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf>

⁹ Mitchell Institute (2022), Election 2022: Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Brief. Found at: [Election 2022: Early Childhood Education & Care Policy Brief | Victoria University \(vu.edu.au\)](https://www.vu.edu.au/election-2022-early-childhood-education-care-policy-brief)

¹⁰ Clark, B. and Cominos, C. (2022), 'Federal election promises to address childcare shortage need to become reality in Grey, parents say'. ABC Eyre Peninsula, for ABC News Online. Found at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-10/electorate-of-grey-worst-childcare-access-in-australia/101053310>